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THE STRESS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COMING OUT PROCESS IN THE YOUNG  
ADULT POPULATION

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27           The stress associated with the coming out process in the young adult population.

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### Abstract

30   The aim of this study is to show the characteristics of stress during a highly stressful coming-  
31   out, compared to other stress situations. Our sample comprises 400 lesbian, gay or bisexual  
32   young adults aged 18 – 26. The results show high stress during the coming-out. Indeed,  
33   almost all participants experienced at least one stressful coming out. According to the  
34   transactional model of stress, the primary appraisal (risk assessment/threat) and the secondary  
35   appraisals (resources) were examined. Two specificities are present during coming out: the  
36   fear to hurt their close ones and the limited resources to cope. These data show the necessity  
37   to better understand this specific stressor.

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39   ***Key words:*** coming-out, stress, transactional model, LGB.

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42 The stress associated with the coming out process in the young adult population.

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### **Introduction**

45 The present study was conducted with a group of 400 young adults, aged 18-26, self  
46 identified as lesbians, gays or bisexuals (LGB). The purpose is to understand the stress of  
47 LGB young adults during their coming out from the perspective of the “minority stress  
48 model” (MSM) (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, Dietrich, & Schwartz, 2008; Meyer & Northridge,  
49 2007) and the “transactional stress model” (Coyne & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus  
50 & Folkman, 1984).

51 The MSM distinguishes the excess stress to which persons from stigmatized social  
52 categories are exposed as a result of their social position. According to the MSM, members of  
53 stigmatized minority groups have specific stressors called “minority stress”, such as  
54 experiences of prejudice events, rejection or discrimination, which add to those of the general  
55 population (Meyer & Northridge, 2007; Meyer, 1995). Coming out is a “minority stress ”  
56 (D’Augelli, 2002; Floyd & Stein, 2002). It is characterized by two phases: the revelation to  
57 oneself and the revelation to others (Riley, 2010). This research is focused on the second  
58 revelation and the term “coming-out” will be used in this article only in reference to this  
59 aspect of the coming-out process. Disclosure implies defining oneself as different, outside the  
60 norm (Bonet, Wells, & Parsons, 2007), but also facing other people and their possible  
61 judgment. The stress during this revelation is increased by the possibility of rejection  
62 (D’Augelli, 2002; Meyer, 2003). Hence, a great number of LGB adolescents and young adults  
63 do not reveal their sexual orientation, especially to their family, fearing that their relationship  
64 might be altered (D’Augelli, Grossman, Starks, & Sinclair, 2010). The developmental theory  
65 suggests that parental responses to their children’s coming out may partially predict their

66 social, emotional, and behavioral trajectories. Indeed, individuals' self-perceptions are based  
67 on the ways they perceive their parents' perception of themselves (Rohner, 2004). When the  
68 revelation leads to parental rejection it can induce instability, fear and anxiety (Julien, 2000).  
69 Ryan et al. (2009) recruited a sample of 224 LGBs aged 21-25, and participants reporting  
70 higher levels of parental rejection were six times more likely to report elevated levels of  
71 depression and eight times more likely to have attempted suicide. In some studies, coming out  
72 is positively associated with shame, guilt, and disrupted relationships (Pachankis, 2007) as  
73 well as symptoms of depression and anxiety (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009).

74         Although the coming-out process is generally considered a stressful event with  
75 negative mental health outcomes, it can also sometimes be perceived as a positive experience  
76 (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007). When the family accept the sexual orientation of their loved one,  
77 they encourage the construction of a positive sexual identity (Julien, 2000), increased well-  
78 being (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999), better self-esteem and less anxiety and  
79 distress (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). Indeed, according to identity  
80 development theory, coming out is an essential component of homosexual identity formation  
81 (Cass, 1979). The Model of Cass is one of the foundational theories. It shows the complexity  
82 of LG identity development ("identity confusion": a time of curiosity, confusion or anxiety of  
83 this initial awareness, "identity comparison": the person begins to accept the possibility of  
84 having a predominantly gay or lesbian orientation, "identity tolerance": acknowledgement of  
85 being gay or lesbian, etc.). Many studies have shown the impact of stress during the coming  
86 out but very few focused on the characteristics of this stressor.

87         To better understand the characteristics of the stress of coming out, we also looked  
88 into the "transactional stress model" (Coyne & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus &  
89 Folkman, 1984), where stress is not seen as a stimulus or a response, but rather as a process :  
90 "psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that

91 is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or  
92 her well-being” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 19). This relationship goes through two  
93 important phases: cognitive appraisals and coping. This research is focused on the cognitive  
94 appraisal. Cognitive appraisal is characterized by two cognitive mechanisms.

95 Primary appraisal refers to the stakes a person has in a certain encounter (Risk  
96 assessment/threat). Secondary appraisal refers to perceived resources for coping with  
97 demands (perceived control). Consequently, stress is present when the subject perceives the  
98 situation as a threat and does not feel capable of coping with it. Our method is based on this  
99 model.

100

#### 101 **Method**

102 This research was conducted during a doctorate in France and under the supervision of  
103 a Full Professor.

104

#### 105 **Participants.**

106 Participants were recruited in 2010 on two French dating sites for LGBs (Gaypax:  
107 [www.gaypax.com](http://www.gaypax.com), Gayvox: [www.gayvox.fr](http://www.gayvox.fr)). Private mails were sent to all profiles  
108 describing the theme, the framework and the procedure. To those interested we sent a  
109 confidential questionnaire after they had signed a consent form online. So, all data were  
110 collected online. We recorded these data on a secure university computer and removed them  
111 from our inboxes. Then, we contacted the individuals again (by mail or telephone) to answer  
112 any questions they may have.

113 Our sample is comprised of 400 young adults self-identified as LGB, and aged 18-26,  
114 because coming out to relatives often happens around that age (Savin-Williams & Ream,  
115 2003). The mean age is 21.78 years (SD = 2,6), 145 women (36.25% of the sample) and 255

116 men (63.75% of the sample). We interviewed subjects from various French regions: 57.5% in  
117 town centers (n = 230 ), 27.5% in rural areas (n = 110), 11.8% in bourgeois suburbs (n = 47)  
118 and 3.2% in disadvantaged suburbs (n = 13).

119 The sample was sorted into three categories according to the instructions in the  
120 questionnaires. In the group “imposed CO” (n = 200) the participants responded in reference  
121 to their most stressful coming out (“*Consider your most stressful revelation of your sexual*  
122 *orientation and answer the following questions*”). Two-hundred other subjects answered the  
123 same questionnaire but in reference to the most stressful situation in their lives (“*Consider the*  
124 *most stressful situation in your life and answer the following questions*”). Among them, 52  
125 subjects chose their coming out (group “free CO”) and 148 subjects chose other situations and  
126 were placed in the group “OS” (“Other Situations”). In the group “OS”, the situations varied a  
127 lot: family problems (n = 36, i.e. 24.3%), emotional problems (n = 27, i.e. 18.24%) or health  
128 problems (n = 17, i.e. 11.49%). Nine subjects mentioned their work (6.10%), seven their  
129 studies, seven their leisure activities, seven others events in relation with public transport.  
130 Several more situations were mentioned marginally (e.g. legal problems, rapes, etc).

131

## 132 **Measures**

133 **Characteristics of the situation.** Age at the moment of the stressful situation, level of  
134 preparation and initiative (0 = “ not at all ” and 4 = “ totally ”), outcome (1 = “not solution  
135 and the situation worsened” and 6 = “the situation is resolved as you like it”) and the persons  
136 involved in the situation. We also asked participants how stressful their coming out was.

137 **Primary appraisal of stress (risk assessment/threat).** According to the  
138 “transactional stress model”, people evaluate the possible threat of a situation, that is, if it can  
139 endanger their well-being. So, participants rated the importance of 13 general risks, on a scale

140 from 0 for “not at all” to 4 for “a lot” (eg. hurt a relative, lose your self-esteem, appear as a  
141 person without ethics, diminish your financial resources, etc.) (Graziani, 2001).

142 **Secondary appraisal (resources).** During the secondary appraisal, the subjects  
143 evaluate coping resources. The questionnaire includes four ways of coping: change the  
144 situation or act on it, accept the situation, seek information before acting, or stick to the plan  
145 and keep doing what you wanted to do (Folkman, 1984; Kessler, 1998 ).

146 The aim of this study is to show the specificities of the stress of coming-out, compared to  
147 other stress situations. Therefore, we compared the averages of three groups (ANOVA) with  
148 SPSS.

149

## 150 **Results**

### 151 **Characteristics of the situation.**

152 Almost all participants had experienced several stressful coming out events, two on  
153 average. Only 10 had never had even one stressful revelation (Table 1). On average, all  
154 participants experienced the chosen stressful situation at the age of 18. In groups “imposed  
155 CO” and “free CO”, participants were more prepared and they had been more at the initiative  
156 of the situation than in the group “OS”. Hence, coming out is a situation which is more  
157 prepared and provoked by LGBs than other stressful situations. In the three groups, the  
158 individuals mostly considered that the outcome of the situation was beneficial to them.

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164 *Table 1: Characteristics of the situation in the three groups (means, standard deviations and*  
 165 *ANOVA).*

Variable	$F_{(2)}$	Group "imposed CO" n = 200		Group "OS" n = 148		Group "free CO" n = 52	
		$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$
Number of stressful COs	3.53*	2.36	1.71	2.23	1.69	2.96	1.79
Age at time of situation	1.79	18.19	2.58	18.80	3.65	18.52	2.47
Degree of preparation	13.03***	1.88	1.56	1.23	1.4	2.33	1.53
Degree of initiative	16.78***	2.22	1.63	1.30	1.61	2.44	1.61
Outcome of situation	2.79	4.62	1.76	4.49	1.73	5.13	1.34

166 *Note. \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$*

167

168 In the group "OS", the individuals reported quite different situations (Table 2). A large  
 169 proportion mentioned complex configurations (like partners/parents, parents/teachers or  
 170 included people who were not on the list of propositions). For the two other groups, the  
 171 responses were more homogeneous. For the majority, coming out to family was the most  
 172 stressful, particularly to parents.

173

174 *Table 2: Persons involved in the situation in the three groups (N values and percentages).*

Persons involved	Group "imposed CO" n = 200		Group "OS" n = 148		Group "free CO" n = 52	
	$N$	%	$N$	%	$N$	%
Parents	131	65.50	31	20.90	26	50
Various family members	25	12.50	16	10.80	8	15.40
Partner	0	0	15	10.10	0	0
Friends	28	14	19	12.80	12	23
Family and friends	9	4.50	0	0	6	11.50
Work	3	1.50	8	5.40	0	0
Other	4	2	59	39.80	0	0

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179 **Primary appraisal of stress: risk assessment and threat.**

180 The subjects evaluated the intensity of 13 risks. Scores vary between the three groups  
 181 (Table 3). LGB young adults who match based on their coming-out (groups imposed “CO”  
 182 and “free CO”) were especially afraid of their relatives reaction and the possibility of hurting  
 183 them or of losing their love (risks b, d, g, k). Participants in the “OS” group feared more for  
 184 their own well-being, their health and their future, professional or financial (risks c, e, f, h and  
 185 m). Nevertheless, even if the nature of the threat was different, it’s intensity (total risk score)  
 186 was similar in the three groups. These results show a specificity of the coming out situation,  
 187 in which the subjects fear more for their relatives than for themselves

188  
 189 Table 3: *Primary appraisal of stress (risk assessment and threat) in the three groups (means,*  
 190 *standard deviations and ANOVA).*

Risk	F (2)	Group “imposed CO” n = 200		Group “OS” n = 148		Group “free CO” n = 52	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
a. Harm the physical well-being and health of your relatives	1.68	1.09	1.46	1.24	1.62	0.81	1.27
b. Hurt a relative	6.26**	2.76	1.39	2.32	1,71	3.10	1,32
c. Jeopardize your own physical health, your security or your well-being	17.92***	1.51	1.49	2.68	2,27	1.69	1.60
d. Disrupt the habits of a relative	13.72***	2.05	1.38	1.45	1.61	2.58	1.35
e. Not achieve a an important goal at work	21.82***	0.55	1.11	1.32	1.67	0.17	0.59
f. Diminish your financial resources	11.12***	0.48	1	0.91	1,42	0.13	0,49
g. Lose somebody’s affection who is important to you	29.90***	3.06	1.32	1.97	1.81	3.44	1.02
h. Lose your self esteem	6.92**	1.04	1.32	1.57	1.55	1	1.40
i. Appear as a careless person	0.82	0.86	1.17	1.03	1,48	0.85	1.27
j. Appear as person without ethics	0.27	1.03	1.35	1.01	1.46	1.17	1.40
k. Lose somebody’s approval or respect who is important to you	1.46***	2.81	1.41	1.90	1.67	2.94	1.32
l. Lose respect for someone else	2.76	1.19	1.50	0.94	1.44	1.48	1.69
m. Show yourself as incompetent	32.70***	0.47	1.02	1.46	1.62	0.25	0.71
Total	0.50	1.45	0.65	1.53	0.72	1.51	0.59

192 Note. \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

193

194 **Secondary appraisals (resources).**

195           The participants also evaluated several ways of coping with the situation. In the three  
 196 groups, they favoured acceptance (Table 4). On average, the subjects of the group “OS” have  
 197 more resources to deal with the situation (such as change the situation or seek information  
 198 before acting) than the other subjects. Therefore, the participants who announced their  
 199 homosexuality seemed to have fewer resources to deal with their coming-out. In a very  
 200 stressful coming out, LGBs believe they have little influence on the situation. This low sense  
 201 of control is an important aspect in the comprehension of excessive coming out stress.

202

203 **Table 4 :** *Secondary appraisals (resources) in the three groups (means, standard deviations*  
 204 *and ANOVA).*

Coping resources	<i>F</i> (2)	Group “imposed CO” n = 200		Group “OS” n = 148		Group “free CO” n = 52	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
a. Change the situation or act on it	10.43***	0.89	1.21	1.51	1.48	0.88	1.15
b. Accept the situation	1.95	2.98	1.25	2.82	1.43	3.23	1.16
c. Seek information before acting	7.68***	1.25	1.33	1.72	1.56	0.94	1.27
d. Stick to the plan and keep doing what you wanted to do	4.73**	1.23	1.45	1.74	1.65	1.33	1.54
Total	10.90***	1.59	0.67	1.95	0.83	1.60	0.69

205

206 **Discussion**

207           Our results show the high stress of LGB young adults when revealing their sexual  
 208 orientation. Indeed, almost all participants experienced at least one stressful coming out.  
 209 However, the intensity of the stress varied among the individuals, 148 subjects (group “OS”)  
 210 did not consider their coming-out as the most stressful event in their lives. For most of them,  
 211 coming out to the family, especially to the parents, was the most stressful one. Our data show  
 212 that the revelation takes place on average at the age of 18, as in the study by Willoughby,  
 213 Malik and Lindahl (2006). But questioning about sexual orientation can begin as early as the

214 age of 10 (Carver, Egan, & Perry, 2004; Floyd, & Stein, 2002). Some individuals delay this  
215 revelation because they fear negative reactions from their parents. The results of Ryan et al.  
216 (2009) show that for 43% of LGB young adults (21-25), parents reacted negatively to their  
217 coming out. In comparison, only the parents of 11% of the participants accepted their  
218 homosexuality. In France, in the “SOS Homophobie” (a non profit organization) report  
219 published in 2015, 230 calls (10% of calls) concerned homophobic acts by relatives, mostly  
220 parents (59%). After the age of 18, the need to reveal their homosexuality and the  
221 opportunities of doing so appear to increase. As noted by Savin-Williams and Esterberg  
222 (2000), in the younger population, the concerns are all the more significant since they live  
223 with their parents or are financially dependent on them. But coming out is more of a lifelong  
224 process and although disclosure may have occurred with parents and friends, every encounter  
225 with a new person or a new environment requires a decision about whether or not to disclose  
226 one’s sexual orientation (Ragins, 2008).

227       Our results show that in a particularly stressful coming out, the LGB young adults mainly  
228 fear to hurt their loved ones, to harm them. Conversely, in the other stressful situations, they  
229 are more concerned about their welfare, their security, their future or their financial resources.  
230 These differences in primary appraisal demonstrate one of the specificities of coming out  
231 stress. The threat is associated with relatives rather than the individual. Indeed, the revelation  
232 involves exposure to a possible rejection. This fear of rejection is one of the most prevalent  
233 reasons for not coming out. Savin-Williams and Ream (2006) explored the disclosure process  
234 to parents in 17–25-year-old LGBs (N = 164) and showed that the predominant reason for not  
235 coming out to their mother is that it would damage the relationship. They expected negative  
236 reactions from their mothers, they feared disappointing them or losing their support.

237       Nevertheless, despite the fear of hurting their loved ones, a large majority of the  
238 participants estimated that their revelation had a positive outcome. Conversely, the literature

239 emphasizes the importance of negative reactions both in the USA (Savin-Williams & Ream,  
240 2003; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006) and in France (Hefez, 2003; Beck, Firdion,  
241 Legleye, & Schiltz, 2010; SOS Homophobie, 2015). This discrepancy can be partially  
242 explained by our retrospective questionnaire. It could have led some participants to assess the  
243 result of their coming-out positively now, while it would have been considered unsatisfactory  
244 immediately after the event. These data suggest that the relatives' attitudes evolve positively  
245 over time, which has been shown in other studies (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2011; D'Augelli  
246 et al., 2010 ; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2006). The coming out of a child implies gradual  
247 adjustment of the parents, it implies that they break down their stereotypes about  
248 homosexuality and shake off guilt (Floyd et al., 1999). In addition to the significant threat of  
249 their coming out, participants believe they have few coping resources, which can affect their  
250 sense of control and thus the intensity of stress. Yet, our data show that LGB young adults are  
251 more likely to prepare and provoke their coming-out than other stressful situations. These  
252 results seem contradictory with weak perceived control. We are allowed to think they believe  
253 they cannot influence the reactions of their relatives rather than the situation itself.

254

### 255 **Limitations.**

256 This research has several limitations. The online recruitment is more likely to contain  
257 potential lies and errors than a questionnaire administered face-to-face. Yet, it is an efficient  
258 recruitment in a particular population difficult to access (Fenner et al., 2012) like LGBs. Some  
259 important French research organizations (“Institut national de la santé et de la recherche  
260 médicale” (INSERM) and “institut de veille sanitaire” (IVS)) have resorted to online  
261 recruiting (Pouchieu, Castetbon, Galan, Herberga, & Touvier, 2012) and questions about the  
262 veracity of the responses arise as soon as individuals are asked to give their opinion.  
263 Furthermore, our sample is composed only of people on dating sites which may be a lack of

264 diversity in our population. And, as previously mentioned, the retroactive character of our  
265 questionnaire requires the examination of the results with particular attention.

### 266 **Conclusion**

267 Our results show two specificities of coming out: the fear to hurt relatives, to harm them  
268 and the limited resources to cope with it. The combination of these two dimensions lead to  
269 high stress in LGB young adults during their coming out. So, information campaigns and  
270 discussion groups for adolescents or young adults (eg. information about sexual diversity,  
271 specific stressors and places where they can talk about them) could reduce their isolation and  
272 help them develop ways of handling their revelation. However, even if some disclosures are  
273 stressful, the stress level depends on the individuals. When we ask their most stressful  
274 situation in their lives three quarters of the participants evoke other situations. Finally, we  
275 focused on the vision of LGB young adults, but coming out also involves other people. Our  
276 data show that the coming-out to the family is frequently the most stressful of all.  
277 Consequently, an information campaign targeting families seems essential, since knowing  
278 about homosexuality enhances the adjustment process and parental acceptance (Ben-Ari,  
279 1995).

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